

ABC Agents Stern but Understanding

BY GORDON GRANT

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Owning a bar or a liquor store is a risky business, and not just because the State Alcoholic Beverage Control agents are breathing heavily one step behind.

"People seem to think that if they can get a license and open a little store to sell whiskey and beer, they've automatically got it made, and the money flows in," said Fred Willett.

"That just isn't so. In the liquor business, even the people you love and trust can hurt you."

Willett knows both sides of the issue. He's administrator for the Alcoholic Beverage Control (ABC) district that covers all the Valley and the areas north to Kern County, east to Pasadena, and west to the Ventura County line.

Stern but Compassionate

As such, the good conduct of bar and liquor store owners is his first concern and he and his agents don't hesitate to move against the ones who illegally use bare-bosomed barmaids or sell to minors.

But he has compassion, too.

"There was a man here in the Valley who had a small liquor store," Willett said. "Including his off-sale license and his inventory and lease and all, he had a few thousand dollars invested. But he was just barely squeezing by financially, and he was very careful not to get in trouble with us or any other law agencies."

The man also had 18-year-old twin sons. "They were good boys," Willett said. "But suddenly one of them decided he needed a little more prestige among his young

friends. He began getting beer and wine for them from his father's store.

"When we caught him, we were inclined to be as lenient as possible. The father had a good record and wasn't directly responsible for what had happened.

Second Son Also Caught

"So we were in the process of suspending his license for just a very short time when we happened to catch his other son giving liquor to his little girl friend.

"What could we do? Now the man has a 60-day suspension. That means he's out of work, out of income for two months. He didn't have much in the way of reserves, but the rent on the store just goes right on, and so do his household expenses.

"All out-go. No income. In the meantime, his regular customers are drifting away to other stores. When his suspension is over he'll be starting from scratch. He'd have been better off selling milk at a corner stand."

Working such hardships on dispensers of alcoholic beverages is not the prime purpose of the ABC.

The list of real purposes could start with protection of juveniles from the influences of alcohol, protection of adults from being cheated in their liquor purchases, protection of sober adults from drunk adults, protection of churches, schools and homeowners from the proximity of what they might consider undesirable premises.

750 Establishments

Willett said there are about 250 bars (on-sale licensed) and 500 liquor stores (off-sale licensed) in the Valley area.

With a staff of 11 special investigators and enforcement agents working out of offices at 6931 Van Nuys Blvd., the ABC keeps an eye

on the whole spread. In addition, staff members spend a lot of time checking out new applicants for licenses.

"And in recent months we had a flurry of activity involving the topless barmaids," Willett said. "At one time there were 34 taverns and bars in the Valley featuring waitresses who were bare, or almost bare, from the waist up. It took some time and a lot of work, but today, as far as we know, there are none of these operations going on in the Valley."

Juvenile Drinking Problem

A constant worry, but not what Willett called a "heavy problem as far as the ABC is concerned," is juvenile drinking.

"Sure, the young people get it," he said, "and when we catch them we can arrest them. But they seldom get it directly from a licensed vendor which is our concern.

"The young ones have older friends who buy it for them, or they get it by using a false identification card. It's very rare for a man with a license to deliberately sell to a minor. He's got a lot of money invested in that license. If he risks that over a six-pack of beer, he's an idiot."

Psychology Factor

ABC agents spend long hours, dressed in anything from dirty work clothes to neat business suits, going from bar to bar watching for violations. Sometimes they are armed. Rarely do they get involved in physical violence.

"It's no picnic being the lone villain in the midst of a bunch of belligerent drunks," Willett said. "But a good officer uses a lot of psychology. He can kid a drunk into going to jail a lot easier than he can fight with him."



INSPECTOR—John Leaken, special investigator in Van Nuys office of State Alcoholic Beverage Control force, checks bottles of liquor for compliance with legal requirements as part of his assignment. Times photo